

Fun at the office

Employee Prerelease

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Contrary to some widely held beliefs, employees of Wizards of the Coast are not swimming in free cards.

I've spent the better part of the last six weeks studying up on the new *Torment* expansion – assigning and editing articles, asking R&D about individual cards' strengths and weaknesses, and poring over image files. But before last Thursday, the only *Torment* card I had ever held in my hands was a lone **Faceless Butcher** – still glued to the ad insert that would soon appear in *InQuest Gamer* – that I procured (after much begging) from the fine people in the marketing department prior to our holiday break.

Sure, I'd "played" with *Torment* cards before. I had a Future Future League deck with **Laquatus's Champion** as a featured fatty, represented by a blank card with "6/3 Nightmare Guy" written on it in green Sharpie. **Giant Strength**, with its 🧙🧙 casting cost, often stands in for **Devastating Dreams**. And I quickly learned that whenever Worth Wollpert cast **Massacre** against me, it was really supposed to be **Mutilate**.

To me, and many other players, **Magic: The Gathering** is a visual game. Playing in the depths of R&D with what passes for "cards" – hastily-scrawled proxies (edited on the fly with scratches and scribbles) and *Ice Age* commons masked by sterile stickers – is ideal for the practical purposes of testing out concepts and mechanics, but it leaves a bit to be desired in the "wonder and amazement" department that drew to me **Magic** in the first place six years ago. While I have enjoyed having behind-the-scenes access to most of the card-making process, the polished end-product is still where it's at. So it was with great joy that I learned about the Employee Prerelease that would be held in the lounge after work on Thursday.

At 5:00 sharp I shut down my computer and headed down the hallway to the first thing resembling a **Magic** tournament that I could participate in since I hung up my DCI number in October.



In the lounge, the tables were all laid out with official numbered markers, talk was circulating of free pizza, and I could here the crinkle of boosters opening. What could be better? The tournament itself had the feel of any other I'd been to, except that the average age of the participants was somewhere around 30, and the intensity level was very, very low. DCI Policy Manager Chris Zantides and rules guru Paul Barclay headed up the event, and people from all departments were there – marketing, sales, editing, brand, organized play, and, of

course, a large contingent from R&D including Randy Buehler and Mark Rosewater. I went as part of a five-man posse from Online Media, including Dan Stahl (the head web producer for **Magic**), and three web developers – Doug Beyer, Kevin Endo, and Mark Jindra (who work on this site, the Sideboard, and the Dungeons & Dragons pages, respectively).



Chris Zantides enters results while Paul Barclay and Henry Stern struggle with Legos.

Even though we were all relatively familiar with the cards' text and art by this point, there were still "oohs" and "ahhs" when Doug opened a **Nantuko Shade**, or Dan a **Balthor the Stout**, or Mark a **Sengir Vampire**. Talk of various combinations and interactions ensued, cards were passed around to be read, and all the "hey-there's-too-many-black-cards" jokes were made; it was enough to make me temporarily forget that I was working for Wizards of the Coast. I felt like I was building decks with my friends at a prerelease back in Pittsburgh.

My "high-profile" cards included **Ambassador Laquatus** and **Major Teroh**, but after shuffling my creatures and mana around, I decided against playing either of the two legends' colors. (My deck, for those interested, is at the end. I think the only mistake I made was not playing **Waste Away** main.) A few quick practice games against Doug allowed both of us to make some last-minute tweaks, and then it was time to play!



Kevin Endo and Dan Stahl summon monsters. Insert: Dan shows his allegiance to the dark side.

The rules were simple: four rounds of Swiss play, and at the end, packs would be given out based on how you did. There was a special "bounty" placed on R&D members – beat one of them, and you'd get an extra three packs! R&D members could collect similar bounty by beating folks from the editing department – the group that had been dominating these events recently. (Maybe reading the card text over and over in search of typos and templating errors burns them into your brain.) In any event, I had plans to collect me some bounty. Come on, I finished 4th at the last Pro Tour I played in; these company types would be no match for me! Plus, I had awesome cards like *Call of the Herd*, *Shower of Coals*, two *Faceless Butchers*, and tons of burn! Look out! Ahem.

My first match was against a person I'd never met before, Brian Hart from Direct Sales. Pleasantries were exchanged, and we shuffled, cut, and drew.

My opening hand contained two land, and the third one was hiding about 14 cards deep in my library. Brian's deck liked him better, and he was able to cast stuff and attack me. I couldn't even begin to resist his stream of creatures, and died in about six turns. Game two was more of the same; my first encounter with madness involved me discarding (and casting) a *Violent Eruption* because I was stuck at three land and had eight cards at the end of my turn. The Eruption bought me maybe two turns at most, but my mana never came together.

An inauspicious start, to be sure. I decided to walk around and see how others were faring.

Across the hall, I found Rosewater locked in a battle with Senior Marketing Manager Kyle Murray, and the smack was flying. Mark was trying to keep creatures in play, but Kyle kept adding *Faceless Butchers* to the table at an amazing rate. At one point he had three out, and Mark's whole team was upside-down and hidden. "Someone has a big stack of *InQuests* in his office," I joked, referring to the absurd number of *Butchers* Kyle had at his disposal. At one point, Mark had a *Sonic Seizure* in his hand, giving him the capability to set off a *Butcher*-destroying train wreck if Kyle attacked. But when Mark tapped his only *Mountain* to cast a blue spell, I walked away.

Apparently he won anyway.



Forsythe vs. Buehler came down to a top-decking war.

neither of us wanted to be 0-2 –so we cut to the chase.

Randy had the **Mountain + Tainted Peak** land draw in game one, and couldn't withstand my opening of **Wild Mongrel** and **Call of the Herd** (twice) that would make most Standard decks win. He beat me around in game two – thanks to **Faceless Butcher** – and game three was looking like one for the ages. The table was piling up with creatures, but I had the advantage. On the ropes, Randy used the last four cards in his hand to **Sickening Dreams** for 3, clearing the board except for my **Ember Beast**, and leaving neither of us with any cards. He had 9 life left, and I had but 4.

I drew **Childhood Horror** and played it; Randy raised his hands in outrage that I would have such good fortune. The thresholded Horror, combined with my **Ember Beast** and the **Firebolt** in my graveyard, threatened to end the game next turn. All this, of course, depended on Randy not drawing something great... which he did, dropping **Faceless Butcher** onto the table with a wide grin. Suddenly my Horror was gone, my Beast was no longer a threat, and I was on the wrong end of a two-turn clock. I drew a land, and then Randy drew **Flame Burst** to take away my last turn as well. So much for collecting an R&D bounty.

Once I had taken my lumps and my ego was sufficiently bruised, my deck decided to cooperate. I beat a fellow named Brian Zembruski in round three (even though he started out with **Carrion Rats** and **Standstill**), the capper coming when I used a **Butcher** to eat up his **Laquatus's Champion**. (If you're seeing "**Faceless Butcher**" referred to a lot, it's because the card is *that* good.)

In the final round, my **Centaur Chieftain** and I took out Jonathan Tweet, who happens to be a member of R&D. Jonathan doesn't work on **Magic** at all – he deals more with TSR products, including the Chainmail miniatures game – but a bounty is a bounty, and I collected my three packs.

Fate was cruel to me in Round 2, with the DCI Reporter pairing me up against my old Team CMU predecessor, Randolph E. Buehler, Jr. I'm not sure how Randy lost the first round, but I think it had something to do with his opponent's **Stern Judge** tapping a few times. We both openly groaned and protested our ill fortune, but pride was on the line –



Marketing's Scott Rouse ended up 0-4, thanks in part to Mark 'the Juggernaut' Rosewater.

My overall 2-2 record was not what I expected. I think my deck was good – I was winning a lot of the “fun games” between rounds against Kevin Endo and Sideboard art director Matt Stevens – but chance is a fickle mistress, and I can’t say that I played perfectly, either (I may never be able to say that again!).

Torment, however, turned out to be the blast I’d hyped myself into hoping it would be. I managed to pull off some cool madness-Mongrel tricks, and the Nightmares are great momentum-swingers.

How’d everyone else do? Randy won out to go 3-1. Dan Stahl and Kevin Endo put up 3-1 records as well. Rosewater pulled out a few wins, even though he was one of the few people not playing black (I don’t think he grasps the set’s theme). Doug Beyer and Mark Jindra, well, let’s just say that they left early.

At the top tables, Organized Play (OP) was threatening to take over Editing’s seat as the hottest department. Kieren Chase and James Do Hung Lee from OP had 4-0 records, as did Editing’s Mark Gottlieb. That meant the last match – between OP head Chris Galvin and editor Kate Stavola – was for all the marbles. Would OP take over the crown with three undefeateds? Or would Editing keep pace with a 2-2 split? Eventually Galvin’s *Overrun* tipped the scales firmly in OP’s favor – maybe there will be bounty on them next time.

Overall, I was pleased to see that the people who bring **Magic: The Gathering** to life enjoy it as much as the public does. When I got here, I had the fear that **Magic** was going to be considered passé – after all, when you deal with some aspect of it for 40+ hours a week, it could easily lose its luster. But, on the contrary, people here honestly love the game.

Just like me.

Game hard,
Aaron Forsythe

Oh, here's my deck. Most of the sideboard got mixed in with other cards, and I couldn't reconstruct it. But the relevant parts are here. Because of all the madness and threshold cards at my disposal, I'll stand by my choice of **Fledgling Imp** over **Dusk Imp** until the day I die.

Aaron Forsythe

Main Deck

Sideboard

7 Mountain
6 Swamp
4 Forest
1 Ravaged Highlands

1 Shower of Coals
2 Fiery Temper
1 Firebolt
1 Violent Eruption
1 Temporary Insanity
1 Sonic Seizure
1 Call of the Herd

1 Sylvan Might
1 Mind Sludge
1 Psychotic Haze
1 Crypt Creeper
1 Infected Vermin
1 Dusk Imp
1 Waste Away
1 Flash of Defiance
1 Halberdier
1 Kamahl's Sledge
1 Reckless Charge

1 Childhood Horror
1 Fledgling Imp
2 Faceless Butcher
2 Gloomdrifter
1 Soul Scourge
1 Gravegouger
1 Krosan Archer
1 Rabid Elephant
1 Centaur Chieftain
1 Wild Mongrel
1 Ember Beast
1 Barbarian Outcast

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